

THE INTERPRETATION OF CARVED FACES FOUND ON BOULDERS AND COBBLES

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On August 30, 1826, a treaty party including Governor Case of Michigan and Thomas L. McKenney of the Indian Department disembarked by canoe from Michillimackinac. The party was traveling southward to Detroit and McKenney to Washington D.C. The trip began at the end of governmental negotiations with the Chippeway regarding the Treaty of Fond Du Lac. The passage was along the western shore of Lake Huron when on September 1 the party encamped on the edge of Thunder Bay "...just within the curve of its north cape." McKenney further states: "the wind had so increased as to prevent our making the traverse" (McKenney 1827: 408-409). The natives reasoned a gift should be made to the nearby "Manito" so the weather might improve for the ten mile crossing of the bay.

In company with his interpreter, McKenney (1827: 402-403) visited the spot where the Indians told him Manito would be found:

... forty steps from the beach, in a thicket of pine and spruce, and aspen. The place is cleared of all kinds of undergrowth, and is an oval figure, about twenty feet by ten ... In the center of it are about twenty stones, four of which are larger than the rest ... The path leading to this sacred place is well trod by those who come to make their offering to this pile of stones, which is the manito! ... The four large stones the Indians said had been there always, and the little ones had gathered round them since ... offerings are made to secure the pleasure of this god, and to obtain from him the favour of a fair wind, and protection in making the traverse of Thunder bay ... It is the place of the Indians' own selection, and sanctified by their own belief in... the deity who, in their opinion, resides there ... no more is required but a little tobacco, for they believe their manito loves to smoke...

On September 3 the party started their crossing, the wind had fallen, and about midway the bay's surface was found to be perfectly calm.

The recognition that particular locations held sacred importance is not a new concept in North American ethnohistory and archaeology. In fact, this theme is commonly discussed even in the earliest summaries of Ohio's archaeological remains such as mounds and earthworks. This

does, by no means, insinuate that we understand all there is to know about sanctifying space or can we always explain why certain spots on the landscape were considered sacred by aboriginal groups. To the contrary, how semi-nomadic and some semi-sedentary people utilized and why they designated certain features sacred is still a topic worthy of further research and discussion.

Beyond mounds and earthworks, what archaeological clues are there suggesting where these places might be found?

The Thomas McKenney quote was introduced to show just how dynamic this topic might be. Another possible example of a sacred place is the selection of certain stone outcrops from the myriad of rock exposures on which petroglyphs were carved. In his study of primitive religious practices, Mircea Elida (1959:11-12) also warns the sacred and profane in primitive societies are irretrievably tangled together. Sacredness manifests itself even in ordinary objects. Sacred objects retain their profane attributes but the sacredness is revealed and represents a powerful force emanating from the encompassing cosmic milieu. At the same time, sanctifying space is the imitation of creation and act which brings order to the visual world. Even domestic settings and elements within habitational areas may be portals to the spirit world or designed to show the spirit world was with them at all times. Even small artifacts may have once been an expression of the spirit world.

Beyond the possible sacredness of two dimensional petroglyphs, boulders and cobbles with three dimensional carvings have also been reported in the archaeological literature. Hypothetically, these may also be types of traditional cultural properties of a religious or spiritual nature. The occurrence of stones with carvings of faces and heads was briefly mentioned in the Spring 2008 *Ohio Archaeologist* [58(2): 37] and some of these have a relationship to the topic at hand. A number of these carvings have been found in Ohio but few local researchers have speculated on their origin and meaning. Obviously, certain miniature faces carved on small stones seem to have been carved as personal charms have little bearing on the current study. However, there are several larger ones that do not appear to be as portable. In my review of face art, I have noticed that certain face carvings found on larger rocks range in size from fist-size cobbles to large glacial erratic boulders and sometimes larger fragments of bedrock float. This class of large rocks

and cobble stones seem to have another function beyond a personal totem.

Like the rocks at Thunder Bay, Michigan, carvings on rock may insinuate they were sacred and/or represent a traditional sanctified location. The size and weight of this class suggests they were not always portable but were at times of a stationary nature. Conversely, stylistic evidence of some seems to hint that several may not be of aboriginal origin. The following article is an attempt to sort thorough the known examples, separate the ones of questionable origin, and address the function of the remaining ones thought to be produced by native carvers. These sacred stones are so rare we have to extend the research beyond the Ohio River valley to tangibly illustrate the archaeological record and explain their meaning.

Many of the larger head carvings reported from Ohio may not be aboriginal but appear to be of more modern origin. The Smithsonian Institution reports that several times a year inquiries are made requesting the interpretation of heads carved on large rocks. The Smithsonian commonly responds by saying that many of these stones appear idiosyncratic and seem to have been carved for amusement, possibly by emigrant stone workers employed by the local mining trades. These examples date to the post-removal period perhaps to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is unlikely they were carved by natives since they post-date eastern relocation events.

Several Ohio examples seem to fall into this category. For instance, James Swauger (1984: 225-227) reports at least one rock in his study, the Snyder Petroglyph found in Killbuck Township, Holmes County, Ohio may be non-aboriginal. The face itself was carved in relief within round cartouche on a block of local sandstone. Based on the design, Swauger feels that it is unquestionably of Euro-American origin. In the summer 1973 issue of *Artifact* magazine the Haney Brothers of Ironton, Ohio reported another face carved in low profile on a stone slab found in nearby Gallia (?) County, Ohio. There is no compelling evidence, at least stylistically, that this face is of aboriginal origin.

Previously in the *Bulletin of the Ohio Indian Relic Collectors Society*, Kelley (1950:34-35) reports a face carved on a granite boulder weighing 38 pounds (Figure 1). The boulder was found near Big Darby Creek and in a Madison County, Ohio gravel pit associated with the Penn-

sylvania Railroad, a line that once ran through Plain City, Ohio. Stylistically, the face is carved rather realistically. This evidence hints that it may have been carved by an itinerant stone abutment mason during the late 19th century and not by an aboriginal carver.

Unlike the many rather simple, conventionalized native carvings, the later questionable examples appear more realistic or more anthropomorphic exhibiting naturalist elements (hairlines, brows, protruding chin, ears, etc.) more frequently. It would also be less likely that a hardstone like granite would be selected for decoration aboriginally. Each of these attributes seem to suggest a relatively modern carving of non-aboriginal origin. A steatite face found nailed to a barn door in Gallia County, Ohio and once owned by Kendall Saunders formerly of Westerville, Ohio seems to fall into a similar category (see the back cover of the *Ohio Archaeologist* 33(3): Summer 1983). Conversely, other examples appear to date at least to the Early Historic Period and before EuroAmerican settlement. However, their relative rarity requires a rather broad region of inquiry on which to base any further interpretation.

A good example of a carving in an aboriginal style is the Pennsylvania petroglyph discovered in Schuylkill County near Minersville, (eastern) Pennsylvania (Figure 2). The nine inch high face was found carved on a sandstone outcrop. Remarkably, the carving stands in low relief, a design unlike the typical prehistoric pictographic outline drawings commonly found in the Eastern Woodlands region. For this reason, the example is thought to be of historic Lenape origin. Other more crudely executed asymmetric faces carved on moderately sized stone fragments (i.e. with a maximum length of less than one foot) and rounded river cobbles are widely distributed in the Eastern Woodlands region. Examples from New Jersey and Staten Island, New York were reported during the 19th century (Figure 3). Another which was seemingly carved aboriginally includes one found along the Susquehanna River in northeastern Pennsylvania and near the late 18th century Delaware Indian town of Wyalusing (Figure 4). Both Alanson Skinner (1920:5) and William Fenton (1941:15) clearly recognized the more abstract, sometime nativistic posture of the carving as having a stylistic relationship to the protruding tongue wooden masks of the Iroquois, particularly the Onondoga.

Though still rather rare, a more common artifact type is a rounded river cobble with a simple face pecked and scratched onto its surface. At least six are commonly known from the state of New Jersey with most (X=5) having been found along the Delaware River on or near Minisink Island. These include the Philhower specimen pecked on a six inch rectangular cobble (Ritchie 1949: 233); the second

found many years ago in Minisink Island and owned by Dr. Lewis Haggerty (Kraft 1981); a third specimen excavated at the Minisink Site also reported by Kraft (1981); the forth reported by Vernon Leslie (1973: Plate XLIII) now in the Carnegie Museum of Natural History collections in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Figure 5); and one reported to Alanson Skinner (1920) by its owner Dr. William Blackie (Figure 6).

My interest in these six faces stem from the occurrence of similar cobbles found further west. A cobble exhibiting a face pecked onto its surface was found during the excavations at Piney Island on the lower Susquehanna River. This specimen is now on exhibit in the William Penn State Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (Figure 7). Another was found many years ago along the Muskingum River in Coshocton, County, Ohio. This specimen was once in the Hill Collection, of Muskingum County, Ohio (Figures 8-9). The carving was made on a six inch wide and four inch high glacio-fluvial cobble of iron-enriched siltstone. The cobble may have once been a hard exfoliated concretion. The eyes, nose, and mouth elements are encircled by a facial groove which appears to have been ground into the cobble's surface. An eccentric pattern of finely scratched lines also cover the remaining part of the cobble.

One frustrating aspect of the current research was the general lack of cultural context on which to interpret many of these specimens. There was no associative evidence on which to ascribe cultural origin of many faces thus far discovered. Most were not recovered during site excavations. Some faces seem to have been deposited randomly, possibly beyond areas of habitation. However, a few face-decorated cobbles have been found within habitation areas. This association provides a datable context. However, the data suggests they do not consistently date to any one time era. For example, the pecked face from Piney Island, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania was found in stratigraphic deposits dating to the Late Archaic Period, ca. 3200 to 3800 years ago. Contrastingly, one of the faces from the Minisink Site was found on a bed of charcoal which was dated A.D. 1380 or 570 P.B. in radiocarbon years. This specimen was also found in association with ceramic artifacts appropriate for this later era. Contrastingly, there is other evidence that demonstrates faces were also carved and used historically.

A clutch of four stones pertinent to this study are pictured by Frances Densmore (1979: Plate 37b and 94-95) for use in Chippewa ceremonies (Figure 10). Densmore reports these stones were used in a Mide sweat lodge ceremony. The sweat lodge itself was a low circular framework of bent poles covered with blankets, etc. and typically less than four feet in diameter. The central act of the Midewiwin ceremony was the assembly of the partici-

pants in the lodge and the act of sprinkling water over the preheated stones to produce a comforting steam.

Densmore reports the three flattened stones were first pre-heated on an outside fire. They were then brought to the center of the constructed lodge. One of the four men entering the lodge then brought the fourth large, rounded stone by a bent stick used to lift the stone and two sticks called the "arms of the stone" to adjust the position of the principal stone once it was in the lodge. When the principal stone was nearly red hot the men recited, "They are bringing the messenger; be careful he does not fall." When the time was deemed appropriate, water was sprinkled on the upper stone with a small bundle of grass. As the sprinkling occurred, the men then recited, "Now this messenger is about to depart to deliver our message to Mide Manido," the ascending steam was thought to be evidence for the stone's response at which time the men stated "well, he has given our message to Mide Manido, which is a prayer that he will help us in our undertaking." Each man in turn offered a message or prayer and was allowed to sprinkle water on the principal stone in order to receive the stone's response. Following the sweat lodge prayer ceremony, the stones were remanded to a point beside the lodge for safe keeping until they were needed again.

Whether the cobbles with faces found along the Delaware River, the Susquehanna River, and Muskingum River document the prehistoric and early historic origins of the sweat lodge cannot be determined at this time. However, certain other bits of associative data truly suggest that this may be the case. There is ethnographic evidence that sweat lodge ceremonies were a near universal practice in the Eastern Woodlands. This practice was described by the earliest explorers visiting the Hudson and Delaware River valleys. One of the earliest references (1654-1656) is found in the *Geographia Americae with An Account of the Delaware Indians*. Here, Peter Lindestrom refers to the sweat lodge ceremony as the "...Vapor Baths of the American Savage People" (Johnson 1925: 257-258). Later, the use of the sweat lodge is also reported by the Moravian Missionary, Rev. John Heckewelder (2007: 225-227) but as a remedy, not as a formal religious ceremony. Without question, the practice stretches back into antiquity.

It should be noted, the archaeological excavation on Minisink Island found that one face was directly associated with a layer of charcoal. This would imply the stone may have once been heated ceremonially. The previously reported example of a face carved on a cobble that was found along the Muskingum River also exhibits other physical characteristics pertinent to the current research. The stone exhibits an initial stage of heat spalling or pot-lid fracturing insinuating it was once exposed to

heat (Figure 11). The distal half of the stone also exhibits a reddened outer surface. Though it may have been rubbed with red ochre, the staining appears infused into the rock surface. Again, ceremonial firing may have rarefied the stone's surface to its current color. Whether the stone from the Hill collection represents the infiltration of the Muskingum River valley by upper Great Lakes populations, people once associated with eastern coastal areas, or indigenous populations practicing sweat lodge ceremony prehistorically has yet to be determined. Regardless, the use of stones in sweat lodges with conventionalized face depictions which can be interpreted as representing the Manito, or the Algonquian's Great Spirit is a topic worthy of further research, analysis, and interpretation.

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Figure 1
(Baker): A stone face interpreted as non-aboriginal. Originally reported by Kelly (1949) and found near Plain City, Ohio.





Figure 2 (Baker):
A Lenape face found
on an outcrop in
Schuylkill County near
Minersville, Pennsylvania
(photo courtesy of
The State Museum of
Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania
Historical and Museum Commission).

Figure 3 (Baker):
Two examples of carved
stone faces from New Jersey
and Staten Island (photograph
from the Report of the
U.S. National Museum 1896).

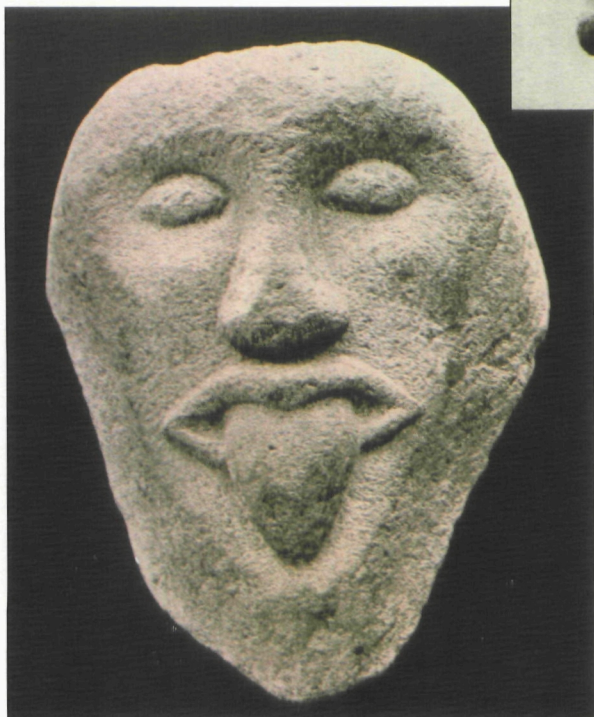


Figure 4 (Baker):
A possible 18th century
face of Delaware origin
found near the town
of Walusing
(after Moorehead 1938).



Figure 5 (Baker): Sandstone cobble face from Minisink Island (photo courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History collections, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania).



Figure 6 (Baker): A cobble from Minisink Island exhibiting an abstract face formerly owned by Dr. William Blackie (after Skinner 1920).

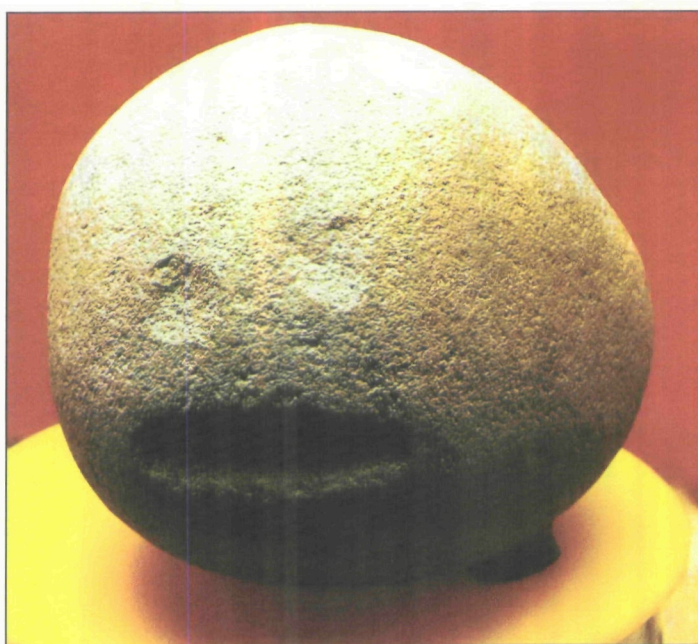


Figure 7 (Baker): A cobble exhibiting a face found during excavations by the State Museum on Piney Island in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, now on exhibit in the William Penn State Museum (photo courtesy of The State Museum of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission).

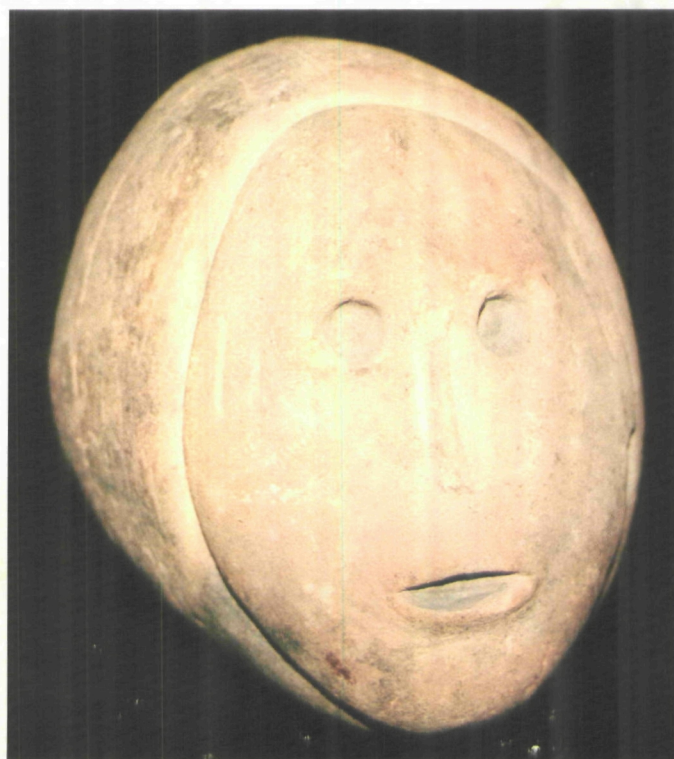


Figure 8 (Baker): View of a carved face found on a cobble recovered along the Muskingum River, Coshocton County, Ohio.



Figure 9 (Baker):
Three quarter view
of the face cobble
from Coshocton
County, Ohio showing
the fine line engraving
posterior to the face.



Figure 10 (Baker):
Four stones used historically by
the Chippewa in their Mide
sweat lodge ceremony
(after Densmore 1929
in the Bureau of
American Ethnology Bulletin 86).



Figure 11 (Baker):
Side view of the face
cobble from Coshocton County,
Ohio showing the reddened
surface and spalling associated
with heating the stone.